
The Elements of Moral Philosophy

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JAMES RACHELS

University of Alabama at Birmingham

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CHAPTER 3

Subjectivism in Ethics

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. . . . You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, toward this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not reason.

DAVID HUME, *A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE* (1740)

3.1. The Basic Idea of Ethical Subjectivism

The Reverend Jerry Falwell said in a television interview: "Homosexuality is immoral. The so-called 'gay rights' are not rights at all, because immorality is not right. God hates homosexuality, and so do we. But we do not hate the homosexual; we want to help him by helping him overcome his sin."

Falwell speaks for a large number of Americans who feel that there is something deeply objectionable about homosexuality. In other societies, of course, people have other views. The rulers of present-day Iran agree with Falwell and take his view to an extreme: there, homosexuals may be castrated or killed or both. (Falwell himself has not endorsed such an extreme view, although a leader of the Moral Majority in California did once propose capital punishment for the "crime" of homosexuality, citing as his authority a passage in the twentieth chapter of Leviticus.) In England, on the other hand, a more tolerant attitude is taken, and all legal penalties were removed three decades ago. What attitude are we to take? One possibility is that we might agree with Falwell and say that ho-

homosexuality is in fact immoral. Or we might disagree and say that in fact homosexuality is *not* immoral. But there is a third alternative. We might say something like this:

Falwell is expressing his own personal opinion, and many may agree with him. But others may have different opinions. Where morality is concerned, there are no "facts," and no one is "right." He has his opinion; others have their opinions; and that's the end of it.

This is the basic thought behind *Ethical Subjectivism*. Ethical Subjectivism is the idea that our moral opinions are based on our feelings, and nothing more. On this view, there is no such thing as "objective" right or wrong. It is a fact that some people are homosexual and some are heterosexual; but it is not a fact that one is good and the other bad. So when someone such as Falwell says that homosexuality is wrong, he is not stating a fact about homosexuality. Instead, he is merely saying something about his feelings toward it.

Of course, Ethical Subjectivism is not simply an idea about the evaluation of homosexuality. It applies to all moral matters. To take a different example, it is a fact that Hitler and his henchmen exterminated millions of innocent people; but according to Ethical Subjectivism, it is not a fact that what they did was evil. When we say their actions were evil, we are not stating a fact about those actions; rather, we are saying that we have negative feelings toward them. Exactly the same applies to any moral judgment whatever.

We should be clear about what *kind* of theory this is. Ethical Subjectivism is not a theory about what things are good and what things are bad. It does not try to tell us how we should live or what moral opinions we should accept. It is not that sort of theory. Instead, it is a theory about *the nature of moral judgments*. It says that no matter what moral judgments we make, we are only expressing our personal feelings, and nothing more. People who accept this theory will still have moral opinions, of course—they might be in favor of gay rights or opposed to them. But whichever stance they choose, they will not believe their choice represents the "truth." They will recognize that their opinions merely represent their own personal feelings.

3.2. The Evolution of the Theory

Often the development of a philosophical idea will proceed through several stages. At first the idea will be put forward in a crude, simple form, and many people will find it attractive for one reason or another. But then the idea will be subjected to critical analysis, and it will be discovered to have serious defects. Arguments against the idea will be found. At this point some people may be so impressed with the objections that they abandon the idea altogether, concluding that it cannot be right. Others, however, may continue to have confidence in the basic idea, and so they will try to refine it—giving it a new, improved formulation—so that it will not be vulnerable to the objections. For a time it may appear that the theory has been saved. But then new arguments may be found that cast doubt on the new version of the theory. Once again the new objections may cause some to abandon the idea, while others may keep the faith and try to salvage the theory by formulating still another “improved” version. The whole process of revision and criticism will then start over again.

The theory of Ethical Subjectivism has developed in just this way. It began as a simple idea—in the words of David Hume, that morality is a matter of sentiment rather than fact. But as objections were raised to the theory, and as its defenders tried to answer the objections, the theory evolved into something much more sophisticated.

3.3. The First Stage: Simple Subjectivism

As we have already observed, Ethical Subjectivism is a theory about the nature of moral judgments. The simplest version of the theory, which states the main idea but does not attempt to refine it very much, is this: when a person says that something is morally good or bad, this means that he or she approves of that thing, or disapproves of it, and nothing more. In other words:

“X is morally acceptable” “X is right” “X is good” “X ought to be done”	}	all mean: “I (the speaker) approve of X”
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And similarly:

"X is morally unacceptable"	} all mean: "I (the speaker) disapprove of X"
"X is wrong"	
"X is bad"	
"X ought not to be done"	

We might call this version of the theory *Simple Subjectivism*. It expresses the basic idea of Ethical Subjectivism in a plain, uncomplicated form, and many people have found it attractive. However, Simple Subjectivism is open to several rather obvious objections, because it has implications that are contrary to what we know to be the case (or at least, contrary to what we *think* we know to be the case) about the nature of moral evaluation. Let me mention two of the most prominent objections.

1. We are sometimes wrong in our evaluations. None of us is infallible, we can make mistakes; and when we discover that we are mistaken, we may want to change our judgments. But if Simple Subjectivism were correct, this would be impossible—because Simple Subjectivism implies that each of us is infallible.

Consider Falwell again, who says homosexuality is immoral. According to Simple Subjectivism, what he is saying is that he, Falwell, disapproves of homosexuality. Now of course it is possible that he is not speaking sincerely—it is possible that he really does not disapprove of homosexuality, that he is merely playing to his conservative audience. But *if we assume he is speaking sincerely*—if we assume he really does disapprove of it—then it follows that what he says is true. So long as he is honestly representing his own feelings, he cannot be mistaken.

Thus the following argument may be offered against Simple Subjectivism:

- (1) If Simple Subjectivism is correct, then each of us is infallible in our moral judgments, at least so long as we are speaking sincerely.
- (2) However, we are not infallible. We may be mistaken, even when we are speaking sincerely.
- (3) Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

2. The second argument against Simple Subjectivism is based on the idea that this theory cannot account for the fact of *disagreement* in ethics. Dan Bradley was formerly the director of the United States Legal Services Administration; he resigned in 1982 in order to "come out of the closet" and publicly acknowledge his homosexuality. (He was the highest government official to have done this, and so his declaration was widely publicized.) Bradley insists that homosexuality is not immoral. On the face of it, it appears that Bradley and Falwell disagree. But consider what Simple Subjectivism implies about this situation.

According to Simple Subjectivism, when Bradley says that homosexuality is not immoral, he is merely making a statement about his attitude—he is saying that he, Bradley, does not disapprove of homosexuality. Would Falwell disagree with that? No, Falwell would *agree* that Bradley does not disapprove of homosexuality. At the same time, when Falwell says that homosexuality is immoral, he is only saying that he, Falwell, disapproves of it. And why should Bradley disagree with *that*? In fact, Bradley would certainly acknowledge that Falwell disapproves of homosexuality. Thus according to Simple Subjectivism, there is no disagreement between them—each would acknowledge the truth of what the other is saying! Surely, the argument goes, there is something wrong here, for surely Falwell and Bradley *do* disagree about whether homosexuality is immoral.

There is a kind of eternal frustration implied by Simple Subjectivism: Falwell and Bradley are deeply opposed to one another; yet they cannot even state their positions in a way that joins the issue. Bradley may *try* to deny what Falwell says, by denying that homosexuality is immoral, but according to Simple Subjectivism he succeeds only in changing the subject.

The argument may be summarized like this:

- (1) When one person says "X is morally acceptable" and someone else says "X is morally unacceptable," they are disagreeing.
- (2) However, if Simple Subjectivism were correct, there would be no disagreement between them.
- (3) Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

These arguments, and others like them, show that Simple Subjectivism is a flawed theory: it cannot be maintained, at least not in such a crude form. In the face of such arguments, some thinkers have chosen to reject the whole idea of Ethical Subjectivism. Others, however, have worked to produce a better version of the theory, one that would not be vulnerable to these objections.

3.4. The Second Stage: Emotivism

The improved version was a theory that came to be known as *Emotivism*. Developed chiefly by the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908–1979), Emotivism has been one of the most influential theories of ethics in the twentieth century. It is a far more subtle and sophisticated theory than Simple Subjectivism.

Emotivism begins with the observation that language is used in a variety of ways. One of its principal uses is in stating facts, or at least in stating what we believe to be facts. Thus we may say:

“Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States.”

“I have an appointment at four o’clock.”

“Gasoline costs \$1.19 per gallon.”

“Shakespeare is the author of *Hamlet*.”

And so on. In each case, we are saying something that is either true or false, and the purpose of our utterance is, typically, to convey information to the listener.

However, there are other purposes for which language may be used. For example, suppose I say to you “Close the door!” This utterance is neither true nor false. It is not a *statement* of any kind; it is a *command*, which is something altogether different. Its purpose is not to convey information; rather, its purpose is *to get you to do something*. In giving you a command, I am not trying to alter your beliefs; instead I am trying to influence your conduct.

Or consider utterances such as these, which are neither statements of fact nor commands:

"Hurrah for Abraham Lincoln!"

"Would that gasoline did not cost so much!"

"Alas!"

"Damn Hamlet!"

These are perfectly familiar, common types of sentences that we understand easily enough. But none of them is "true" or "false." (It would make no sense to say "It is true that hurrah for Abraham Lincoln" or "It is false that alas.") Again, these sentences are not used to state facts; instead, they are used to express the speaker's attitudes.

We need to note clearly the difference between *reporting* an attitude and *expressing* the same attitude. If I say "I like Abraham Lincoln," I am reporting the fact that I have a positive attitude toward him. The statement is a statement of fact, which is either true or false. On the other hand, if I shout "Hurrah for Lincoln!" I am not stating any sort of fact. I am expressing an attitude, but I am not reporting that I have it.

Now, with these points in mind, let us turn our attention to moral language. According to Emotivism, moral language is not fact-stating language; it is not typically used to convey information. Its purpose is entirely different. It is used, first, as a means of influencing people's behavior: if someone says "You ought not to do that," he is *trying to stop you from doing it*. Thus the utterance is more like a command than a statement of fact; it is as though he had said "Don't do that!" Second, moral language is used to express (*not* report) one's attitude. Saying "Lincoln was a good man" is not like saying "I approve of Lincoln," but it *is* like saying "Hurrah for Lincoln!"

The difference between Emotivism and Simple Subjectivism should now be obvious. Simple Subjectivism interpreted ethical sentences as statements of fact, of a special kind—namely, as reports of the speaker's attitude. According to Simple Subjectivism, when Falwell says "Homosexuality is immoral," this means the same as "I (Falwell) disapprove of homosexuality"—a statement of fact about his attitude. Emotivism, on the other hand, would deny that his utterance states any fact at all, even a fact about himself. Instead, Emotivism interprets his utterance as equivalent to something such as

"Homosexuality—yecch!" or "Do not engage in homosexual acts!" or "Would that there were no homosexuals."

Now this may seem to be a trivial, nitpicking difference that isn't worth bothering with. But from a theoretical point of view, it is actually a very big and important difference. One way to see this is to consider again the arguments against Simple Subjectivism. While those arguments were severely embarrassing to Simple Subjectivism, they do not affect Emotivism at all.

1. The first argument was that if Simple Subjectivism is correct, then we are all infallible in our moral judgments; but we certainly are not infallible; therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

This argument is effective only because Simple Subjectivism interprets moral judgments as statements that can be true or false. "Infallible" means that one's judgments are always true; and Simple Subjectivism assigns moral judgments a meaning that *will* always be true, so long as the speaker is speaking sincerely. That is why, on that theory, people turn out to be infallible. Emotivism, on the other hand, does not interpret moral judgments as statements that are true-or-false; and so the same argument will not work against it. Because commands and expressions of attitude are not true-or-false, people cannot be "infallible" with respect to them.

2. The second argument had to do with moral disagreement. If Simple Subjectivism is correct, then when one person says "X is morally acceptable" and someone else says "X is morally unacceptable," they are not really disagreeing. They are, in fact, talking about entirely different things—each is making a statement about his or her own attitude with which the other can readily agree. But, the argument goes, people who say such things *are* disagreeing with one another, and so Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

Emotivism emphasizes that there is more than one way in which people may disagree. If I believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of John Kennedy and you believe there was a conspiracy, it is a disagreement over the facts—I believe something to be true that you believe to be false. But consider a different type of disagreement. Suppose I favor strict gun-control legislation and you are opposed

to it. Here we disagree, but in a different sense. It is not our beliefs that are in conflict but our desires. (You and I may agree about all the facts surrounding the gun-control controversy and still take different sides concerning what we want to see happen.) In the first kind of disagreement, we believe different things, both of which cannot be true. In the second, we want different things, both of which cannot happen. Stevenson calls this second one a *disagreement in attitude*, and he contrasts it with disagreement *about* attitudes. You and I may agree in all our judgments about our attitudes—we agree that you are opposed to gun control, and we agree that I am for it. But we still disagree *in* our attitudes. Moral disagreements, says Stevenson, are like this: they are disagreements in attitude. Simple Subjectivism could not explain moral disagreement because, once it interpreted moral judgments as statements *about* attitudes, the disagreement vanished.

Simple Subjectivism was an attempt to capture the basic idea of Ethical Subjectivism and express it in an acceptable form. It ran into trouble because it assumed that moral judgments *report* attitudes; that is why it was vulnerable to the counterarguments. Emotivism was a superior theory because it jettisoned the troublesome assumption and replaced it with a more sophisticated view of how moral language works. But as we shall see, Emotivism also had its problems. One of the main problems was that Emotivism could not account for the place of reason in ethics.

3.5. Emotivism, Reason, and “Moral Facts”

As was emphasized in Chapter 1, a moral judgment—or for that matter *any* kind of value judgment—must be supported by good reasons. If someone tells you that a certain action would be wrong, for example, you may ask *why* it would be wrong, and if there is no satisfactory answer, you may reject that advice as unfounded. In this way, moral judgments are different from mere expressions of personal preference. If someone says “I like coffee,” she does not need to have a reason—she may be making a statement about her personal taste, and nothing more. But moral judgments require backing by reasons, and in the absence of such reasons, they are

merely arbitrary. This is a point about the *logic* of moral judgment. It is not merely that it would be a good thing to have reasons for one's moral judgments. The point is stronger than that. One *must* have reasons, or else one is not making a moral judgment at all. This is part of what the moral concepts mean. To say "It would be morally wrong to do X, but there is no reason why it would be wrong" is a self-contradiction.

If the connection between moral judgments and reasons is a necessary and important one, then any adequate theory of the nature of moral judgment should be able to give some account of the connection. It is at just this point that Emotivism fails.

What can an emotivist say about reasons? Remember that for the emotivist, a moral judgment is like a command—it is primarily a verbal means of trying to influence people's attitudes and conduct. The view of reasons that naturally goes with this basic idea is that reasons are any considerations that will have the desired effect, that will influence attitudes and conduct in the desired way. Suppose I am trying to convince you that Goldbloom is a bad man (I am trying to influence your attitude toward him) and you are resisting the idea. Knowing you are anti-Semitic, I say: "Goldbloom is a Jew!" That does the trick; your attitude toward him changes, and you agree that he is a scoundrel. It would seem that for the emotivist, then, the fact that Goldbloom is Jewish is, at least in some contexts, a reason in support of the judgment that he is a bad man. In fact, Stevenson takes exactly this view. In his classic work *Ethics and Language* (1944), he says: "Any statement about *any* fact which *any* speaker considers likely to alter attitudes may be adduced as a reason for or against an ethical judgment."

Obviously, something had gone wrong. Not just any fact can count as a reason in support of just any judgment. For one thing, the fact must be relevant to the judgment, and psychological influence does not necessarily bring relevance with it. (Jewishness is irrelevant to viciousness, regardless of the psychological connections in anyone's mind.) There is a small lesson and a larger lesson to be learned from this. The small lesson is that a particular moral theory, Emotivism, seems to be deeply flawed, and with it, the whole idea of Ethical Subjec-

tivism is brought into doubt. The larger lesson has to do with the importance of reason in ethics.

Hume emphasized that if we examine wicked actions—"wilful murder, for instance"—we will find no "matter of fact" corresponding to the wickedness. The universe, apart from our attitudes, contains no such facts. This realization has often been taken as cause for despair, because people assume this must mean that values have no "objective" status. But why should Hume's observation come as a surprise? Values are not the kinds of things that *could* exist in the way that stars and planets exist. (What would a "value," thus conceived, be like?) A fundamental mistake, which many people fall into when they think about this subject, is to assume just two possibilities:

1. There are moral facts, in the same way that there are facts about stars and planets; or
2. Our "values" are nothing more than the expression of our subjective feelings.

This is a mistake because it overlooks a crucial third possibility. People have not only feelings but reason, and that makes a big difference. It may be that:

3. Moral truths are truths of reason; that is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed by better reasons than the alternatives.

This seems to be indisputable—even the emotivists recognized the need to give *some* account of the place of reason in ethics. Thus if we want to understand the nature of ethics, it is reason that we must focus on.

A truth of ethics is a conclusion that is backed by reasons: the "correct" answer to a moral question is simply the answer that has the weight of reason on its side. Such truths are objective in the sense that they are true independently of what we might want or think. We cannot make something good or bad just by wishing it to be so, because we cannot merely will that the weight of reason be on its side or against it. And we can be wrong about what is good or bad, because we can be wrong about what reason commends. Reason says what it says, regardless of our opinions or desires.